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Efficacy of explicit teaching and consciousness-raising in IELTS writing

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Abstract

This study compares the efficacy of Explicit Teaching and Consciousness-Raising on Iranian EFL learners' score in IELT Writing Task 1 of Academic Module. Forty five IELTS candidates, placed in two experimental and one control groups, participated in the study. Participants of the explicit group were given detailed instructions on all parts of the Task. For the C-R group, participants were instructed to provide reasons why they chose particular grammatical structures for sentences they had written. Results showed raising students' consciousness was a more effective way than mere explicit teaching.

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1. Introduction

Each year thousands of students from different countries apply for continuing their education in English-speaking countries, such as Great Britain, Australia, and Canada. One of the most important requirements they have is a certificate which indicates their knowledge of English. International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is the criterion which shows prospective students will be able to master the language in an English-speaking country or universities with English as the medium of instruction, such as Masters and PhD levels in most European countries. It seems that this area is a

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promising field of research and investigation. In fact there have been numerous studies on different aspects of IELTS exam.

However, most research in the field has been conducted on IELTS testing (e.g., Carey, Mannell, and Dunn, 2011; Green & Hawkey, 2012; O'Loughlin, 2002; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010). It should be mentioned that few studies have been conducted on the teaching of IELTS skills. For example, Green (2006; 2007) focuses on the relationship between testing and teaching or the wash back effects of IELTS tests.

Therefore, the present study is intended to investigate the effects of explicit teaching and consciousness-raising (C-R) on IELTS Academic Writing Task 1 scores. In fact the study tries to compare the efficacy of Explicit Teaching and Consciousness-Raising (C-R) on Task Achievement (TA), Cohesion and Coherence (CC), Lexical Range (LR), Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA), as well as the total band score in IELTS Academic Writing Task 1.

2. Review of literature

Hama and Leow (2010) point out that the role of consciousness in learning, in general and language learning in particular, comes under two contrasting points of view, i.e., implicit and explicit learning (see Williams, 2004; 2005). While, Leow (2000) contends that implicit learning does not play an important role in second language acquisition, Williams (2005) presents evidence that learning without awareness is quite possible. In fact, the role consciousness or awareness plays in second language learning has been a long-held one. There has been a debate among second language acquisition researchers and educators on whether different features of language (more specifically grammar) should be taught. Some researchers (e.g., Krashen, 1982) indicate that grammar is acquired naturally, provided sufficient comprehensible input is provided to the learners. In other words, he indicates that grammar does not need to be taught. On the other hand, some other scholars point out that the inclusion of formal grammar teaching is vital for learning the L2 sufficiently and effectively. For example, White (1987) maintains that simple exposure to language is not enough and that instruction is necessary; this is because there are certain grammatical forms that cannot be acquired by exposure alone. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (1995) believes that natural acquisition of grammar does not necessarily follow that it should not be taught.

In addition, it seems that providing corrective feedback in speaking and writing has been an interesting question for many SLA scholars. For example, Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) review studies which provided explicit and implicit feedback and their methodological problems. Hyland and Hyland (2006) is one example of studies on feedback in second language writing.

Something that is of particular interest in this study is the combination of teaching methods (Explicit teaching and Consciousness-raising) and providing feedback which mainly happens through email and using the computer. A very interesting study which has used computer to provide the feedback is Ware and Warschauer (2006). Their work on computer-based feedback on second language writing resulted in introducing three main strands of such research. These three strands include the potential usefulness and cost-effectiveness of software-generated feedback as an attempt to replace or enhance direct human feedback. The second strand is comparative, evaluating the effect of computer-mediated human feedback on ESL writing when compared with more traditional face-to-face feedback. Their third strand is intended to scrutinize the differences that exist between giving the feedback electronically and the feedback provided in online collaborations exchanges.

However, the present study has not removed the role of human in providing the feedback, but just using the computer as a mediator to facilitate the teacher and learners' job.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants of the study were IELTS candidates participating in IELTS preparation course in Gooyesh Language Institute in Isfahan. They were all upper-intermediate level learners of English with an age range of 25-35. A group of 45 language learners were randomly placed in three groups: explicit (n=15), C-R (n=15), and control (n=15).

3.2. Procedures

A general procedure was followed for each of the three groups. All participants received detailed explanation of the course in the very first session. The instructor made students familiar with the procedure. It was specified that a part of the course would be conducted through email and all students were supposed to give their email addresses to the instructor. In addition, students were familiarized with the Review section of MS Office Word, because the instructor would give his comments using this facility. IELTS Academic Writing Task 1 was introduced to the students during four sessions. In addition, the instructor emailed some materials that he thought would be helpful for the students.

First of all, the instructor made the participants familiar with the task in general, that is, the requirements, different types of tasks (table, bar graph, pie chart, process, etc.), the scoring procedures and everything he thought would be useful for them to know about IELTS Academic Writing Task 1. Next, the instructor made students familiar with the different parts of the task, that is, Introduction, Body, and Conclusion. In fact, he provided them with the type of structures and sentences that could be used in each section. For example, in order to write the introduction, he encouraged them to use certain structures such as: *"The following table shows ..."*; here he encouraged the students to become familiar with the type of words and grammar they needed to write the introduction. For instance, the tense of the reporting verbs (e.g., show, demonstrate, indicate, present, etc.) must be simple present, but the other tenses should be past, because most of the time (except for the process), they have to report some data based on surveys and research.

The same procedure was followed for the other parts of the task, that is, the body and conclusion. The instructor made sure that the students were familiar with the part and the type of sentences and structures they were supposed to use. This procedure was followed for both explicit and C-R groups. However, it is imperative to emphasize that the procedure for the latter was a bit different; the C-R participants were required to mention the reasons they had for choosing a particular grammar or why they used a particular structure. The reason for such a technique was that the instructor wanted to increase the participants' awareness or consciousness of both the grammar and the structure. For example, students were supposed to mention in L1 or L2 why they had chosen particular tenses and why they had used different structures. It is necessary to reiterate that they were asked to provide the information using "Comment" in MS Office.

Considering the fact that scores in IELTS come from the four areas of Task Achievement (TA), Cohesion and Coherence (CC), Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA), and Lexical Range (LR), the above-mentioned procedure was followed for TA, CC, and LR, as well. That is, in addition to making students aware of the grammar of IELTS, they were told about cohesion, coherence, and the vocabulary, as much as possible, of the task. For instance, the C-R participants were asked to mention the reason for starting a new paragraph.

4. Results

In order to answer the research question, participants took part in an IELTS exam, which was very similar to the one they were going to have. It should be mentioned that the results of Academic Writing Task 1 were used in order to answer the research question.

To address the research question, which asked about the efficacy of explicit teaching and consciousness-raising on TA, GRA, LR, CC, and the Total band score, the data were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with scores as the dependent variable and group (Explicit, C-R

and Control) as the independent variable. What follows is the presentation of the results for TA, CC, GRA, LR, and Total band score.

4.1. Results of Task achievement

The results showed that there was a highly significant difference between the performance of the two experimental groups and the control group for Task Achievement, $F_{(1, 42)} = 9$, $p < .01$. In fact, the results of post-hoc Scheffe test showed that there was no significant difference between C-R participants ($M = 7$, $SD = .93$) and Explicit ($M = 7.07$, $SD = .70$) ones for TA scores, but both performed much more significantly than the control group ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.19$). The results indicate that awareness, in the form of explicit teaching and raising consciousness equally affected the participants' TA scores.

4.2. Results of Cohesion and Coherence

In order to examine the effects of explicit teaching and consciousness-raising on the CC score of the participants, the relevant data were analyzed. The results showed that there was a significant difference among the scores of the participants of the three groups, $F_{(1, 42)} = 22.52$, $p < .01$. However, in order to see which group outperformed the others the results of the post-hoc test was to be considered. In fact, the results indicated that, like TA, participants of the C-R group ($M = 7.13$, $SD = .92$) and the Explicit group ($M = 6$, $SD = .85$) were associated with significantly higher scores than the control group ($M = 4.73$, $SD = .88$). However, unlike for the TA, there was a significant difference between C-R participants and Explicit participants for CC scores ($p < .05$). It can be concluded that raising participants' consciousness was more effective than explicit teaching for CC scores.

4.3. Results of Lexical Range

Similarly, the results were analyzed in order to see if there was any significant difference among the three groups in terms of using vocabulary in their writing. Like TA and CC, there was a significant difference among the groups' LR scores, $F_{(1, 42)} = 5.29$, $p < .01$. Quite predictably, C-R participants ($M = 6.4$, $SD = .83$) and Explicit ones ($M = 6.4$, $SD = .91$) were associated with significantly higher scores than the control group ($M = 5.67$, $SD = .9$). It should be noted that the results of the post-hoc test showed that there was no significant difference between C-R participants and those of Explicit for LR scores.

4.4. Results of Grammatical Range and Accuracy

In order to see if awareness, in terms of explicit teaching and consciousness-raising, made any difference in the GRA score of the participants, the relevant analysis was followed. In fact, the results showed that there was a highly significant difference among the three groups, $F_{(1, 42)} = 10.59$, $p < .01$. The results showed that the C-R group ($M = 7.27$, $SD = .70$) and Explicit group ($M = 5.87$, $SD = .83$) enjoyed significantly higher scores than the control group ($M = 5.40$, $SD = .99$). In order to see whether there was a significant difference between the performance of C-R group and Explicit group, the results were subjected to the post-hoc analysis, which showed that participants of the C-R group significantly outperformed those of the Explicit group for GRA scores ($p < .01$).

4.5. Results of Total Band Score (TBS)

Finally, in order to examine the impact of explicit teaching and consciousness raising on the Total Band Score (TBS) the same data analysis was conducted the results of which showed that there was a significant difference among the three groups, $F_{(1, 42)} = 31.43$, $p < .01$. In fact, participants of the C-R group ($M = 7.03$, $SD = .48$) and those of the Explicit group ($M = 6.47$, $SD = .44$) were associated with significantly higher scores than the control group ($M = 5.4$, $SD = .54$). Like the results of TA, CC, LR, and GRA, the post-hoc Scheffe was conducted to examine whether C-R and Explicit groups performed similarly or not. It is interesting to know that the results indicated a significant difference between the C-R participants and Explicit participants for the TBS ($p < .05$).

5. Conclusion

The research question of the study was intended to scrutinize the impact of raising awareness in terms of explicit teaching and consciousness-raising on IELTS candidates' scores in TA, CC, GRA, LR, and TBS. The results apparently showed that raising awareness was much more effective than lack of it. The results support previous studies on the inclusion of awareness in language teaching and learning. In fact, the results showed that students are profited more by being provided with both explicit teaching and consciousness-raising, as the results of experimental (C-R and Explicit) groups showed compared with those of the control group. As the results of the study show, it is essential for IELTS instructors to not only familiarize their students with different parts of the test, but also to make them aware of the rules, techniques, and strategies of writing IELTS tasks.

Comparing the performance of the Explicit group with that of the C-R group, it can be concluded that raising students' consciousness of different parts of the task (i.e., TA, CC, GRA, and LR) plays a more effective role than just raising students' awareness by explicit teaching. It is necessary to reiterate that the results indicated that C-R was a more efficient tool in CC, GRA, and TBS.

The results of the study provide promising areas of further research. Explicit teaching and consciousness-raising can be tested on other tasks of IELTS as well. The reason for this is that other IELTS tasks (i.e., Task 1 of General Training and Task 2 of both Academic and General Training) use rather different techniques and strategies which might react differently to awareness in general and explicit teaching and consciousness-raising in particular. Furthermore, in addition to raising awareness, researchers are encouraged to use other techniques such as requiring students to provide uptake, i.e., responding to instructor's feedback.

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